

# **Review of activities and achievements of the Partnership Council for Wales over the 3-year period from January 2019 to end of March 2022**

## **Introduction**

1. Now, more than ever, there is evidence of our public services and all tiers of government in Wales working together with energy and a shared commitment to supporting people and communities to be safe and to receive the services they need.
2. The importance of partnership working, with a genuine commitment to the co-production of policies and plans, and the joint consideration of scientific data, has been evidenced throughout the Covid-19 crisis. During the pandemic there have been daily urgent, time-critical discussions between Welsh Government Ministers, Local Authority Leaders, the police, the voluntary sector and a range of our closest partners.
3. In addition to those urgent discussions, there have been benefits to also having existing fora in place, such as the statutory Partnership Council for Wales (the Partnership Council), which have enabled both strategic and operational cross-public service discussions. These existing fora have enabled the political discussions on shared key issues and challenges to take place, without creating new structures.
4. Partnership Council membership was broadened during the pandemic to include all 22 local authority Leaders (rather than 8 representatives), and also includes representatives from NHS Wales, the Police and Crime Commissioners, National Park Authorities, the Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA), One Voice Wales (OVW), and Fire and Rescue Authorities. Wales TUC's membership brings expertise which helps ensure that discussions take place within the context of social partnership and ensures the workforce implications are recognised and accounted for. Audit Wales also attends as an observer and provider of advice.
5. The First Minister of Wales and all Welsh Ministers are members of the Partnership Council and value it as a means for engagement with local authorities and partners - to discuss, debate and agree constructive ways forward on shared issues, challenges and priorities across portfolios. This complements the other specific engagement mechanisms in place for portfolio areas such as social care, housing, and education. The Partnership Council for Wales is different in that it provides support for the wider relationship between Welsh Government, local government, the third sector, Police and Crime Commissioners and other partner organisations and sectors.
6. This report provides an insight into some of what has been achieved and delivered through Partnership Council for Wales between January 2019 and March 2022. Following the Local Government elections in May 2022 the

Partnership Scheme will again be considered and potentially revised and updated in time for the next phase of building on the relationship between local government and Welsh Government. This again will focus on delivering on the shared priorities going forward, including those in the Programme for Government, which incorporates the Co-operation Agreement priorities. Through its standing agenda items, Partnership Council supports the wider partnership working in the fundamental areas of climate change and Wales's recovery and rebuilding following the Covid-19 pandemic.

## Background

7. Section 73 of the Government of the Wales Act 2006 (the Act) requires the Welsh Ministers to make a scheme setting out how they propose, in the exercise of their functions, to sustain and promote local government in Wales.
8. Section 73 of the Act also requires the Welsh Ministers to publish a report on how the proposals set out in the Scheme were implemented each year. It is hoped that this narrative on the significant achievements of Partnership Council during the period January 2019 to March 2022 will provide an insight into the benefits of partnership working during this extraordinary period, which included the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union and the Covid-19 pandemic.

## Key issues covered by the Partnership Council during this period

### Brexit/European Transition

9. In January 2019 an extraordinary meeting of Partnership Council was convened to focus in earnest on the joint preparations in case of a 'no deal' Brexit. This was facilitated by the First Minister, the then Minister for Housing and Local Government, and the then Counsel General and Brexit Minister. There had been a item at Partnership Council four months earlier when the First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance had discussed the Welsh Government's White Paper, *Securing Wales' Future*, and subsequent policy papers which included evidence, analysis and detailed proposals aimed at protecting jobs, communities and the Welsh economy.
10. By the January 2019 meeting, however, there were less than 100 days until the UK was due to leave the EU on 29 March. Major concerns were raised about the considerable uncertainty on the terms under which the UK would leave, and the increased risk of the UK 'crashing out' without a deal. The Welsh Government worked closely with local authorities and other partners across the public sector to prepare for a possible 'no deal' exit, and has continued to do so in facing up to the different scenarios and developments later in 2019, as well as at the end of the transition period at the end of 2020.
11. The approach taken in response to preparing to leave the EU was one of collaborative joint working, of sharing resources and reducing duplication, 'doing once for Wales' but with each authority able to tailor the response to their own

needs. That approach has continued, and strengthened further in responding to both the Covid pandemic, and the climate change emergency.

12. The Partnership Council engagement on EU exit has always complemented the meetings held by relevant portfolio Ministers with the WLGA Executive Board, and the Local Government EU Preparedness Advisory Panel.
13. Brexit and EU Transition continued as a standing item on all subsequent Partnership Council agendas until 2021. Throughout this time the then Counsel General and Minister for European Transition, or his Policy Director, provided updates for Partnership Council members on the negotiations and the evolving situation. Discussions often focused on the impact of Brexit on the public service workforce, many of whom were EU nationals and uncertain about their future status.
14. It was through Partnership Council that £1.2m Brexit support funding was initially proposed and subsequently agreed; this funding supported the appointment of Brexit coordinators in each of the 22 authorities.
15. At a strategic level, the sharing of preparations and plans for a potential 'no deal' Brexit ensured the Welsh Government and all 22 principal local authorities were aligned and sharing knowledge, along with other partners such as NHS Wales which faced many similar challenges, particularly in relation to supplies and supporting the members of their workforce who were not British nationals.
16. There was a large civil contingencies focus at this stage, with Partnership Council briefings and discussions informing the role of local authorities, as community leaders and providers of key services, and essential to the Wales response to a 'no deal' scenario. This involved regular liaison and close working between the local authorities, the regional Local Resilience Fora and the Emergency Co-ordination Centre Wales (ECCW), all feeding into Welsh Government and Ministers with ongoing intelligence. This in turn aided the flow of information into the UK Government Brexit operations.
17. At an operational level, the agreement made during a Partnership Council meeting to combine the distribution of Welsh Government advice leaflets with annual council tax statements being issued by local authorities was an example of providing timely advice to citizens in a way which was likely to have better reach and achieve administrative cost savings.
18. In addition, the WLGA and local authorities have been pivotal in the support provided to European citizens in Wales who have made, and who continue to make, applications to the EU Settlement Scheme. In particular, and through collaborative working, there have been substantial efforts made to support vulnerable groups of EU citizens across Wales, including looked after children, homeless citizens and citizens open to social services.
19. The work following the UK's departure from the EU is still ongoing and the subsequent impacts, including on the public service workforce, supplies and delivery of services, are still discussed at Partnership Council meetings (despite

the standing item slot now being necessarily focused on Wales' recovery from the Covid pandemic).

## **Covid-19 Pandemic**

20. During this challenging and unprecedented period, as we have lived through the Covid-19 pandemic and felt the impact on our lives and our public services, the Partnership Council for Wales provided a fundamental meeting point for public service leaders to come together, virtually, to focus on the key challenges which were best met together. This strong and united leadership has been crucial in supporting Wales' communities, workforces and citizens by ensuring they continued to receive vital existing, and new, services and support throughout the public health crisis.
21. Communities and individuals have also been supported by the community and town councils, the Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA) and voluntary sector organisations and volunteers – all of whom have been crucial in the supporting efforts, particularly in providing targeted support for the most vulnerable.
22. The Welsh Government has worked closely with the Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) and Chief Constables in Wales, although the responsibility for policing policy and delivery remains non-devolved. Throughout the Covid pandemic, the Minister for Finance and Local Government and the Minister for Social Justice have jointly met regularly with local authority Leaders, PCCs and Chief Constables to facilitate urgent consideration of the overlapping, and the separate, considerations each of their responsibilities require, for example in areas such as enforcement of Covid regulations.
23. The Partnership Council has remained an important, stable element of the Covid engagement strategy as a glue which has pulled the strands together quarterly, facilitated discussions around progress against key priorities, and jointly planned for next steps.

## **Wales' Recovery**

24. As Wales slowly moved out of the first lockdown and into the initial Recovery phase, a sub group of the Partnership Council, the Recovery Sub Group, was established to provide a formal mechanism for Welsh Ministers, local authority Leaders and other public service leaders to continue engagement on Covid-19 recovery. It was acknowledged that the pandemic was not a short term crisis and there was a need to continue the shared leadership shown by public services in now beginning to implement a recovery plan for Wales.
25. During the pandemic, public servants had proven themselves to be resourceful, innovative and flexible, and so capturing the learning from that period was important to help strategically plan and implement the ongoing transformation of services.

26. The work of the Recovery Sub Group was set within the context of wider work on recovery, including the adoption of the values expressed throughout the Welsh Government's publications related to the pandemic, '*Leading Wales out of the Coronavirus Pandemic: A Framework for Recovery*', in April 2020, and '*Unlocking our society and economy: continuing the conversation*' in May 2020.
27. The sub group supported the then Counsel General in his role as Minister with lead responsibility for the coordination and oversight of Covid-19 Recovery. At a meeting of the sub group, the Counsel General highlighted social care, housing, economy and a green recovery as the four broad areas he was focusing on in his recovery discussions.
28. Through the Partnership Council, the WLGA was asked to demonstrate how local authorities' recovery proposals would contribute to each of these four areas, and to identify those which would have the biggest impact on communities, whilst simultaneously meeting a range of policy objectives. The subsequent WLGA paper, '*Key Opportunities for Change and Economic Stimulus*', then formed the basis of ongoing discussions, both at Partnership Council and with portfolio Ministers.
29. Crucially, the work of the sub group was aligned with existing work that was already underway, or was being planned, in areas such as social care reform, so the sub group did not duplicate work, but helped brigade and shape what was underway.
30. The sub group also agreed a focus on the cross cutting areas of energy, digital and skills, as outlined in the economic stimulus paper. This included capitalising on the digital agenda, working with digital leaders to lock in the learning around digital services and agile working, and exploring tools to aid recovery through increased collaboration and digital engagement.
31. The contributions from Partnership Council, along with wider inputs from citizens and experts across Wales, informed the '*COVID-19 Reconstruction: Challenges and Priorities*' publication. This summarised the impacts of the pandemic and set out immediate priorities that were funded through a £320m reconstruction package. It also set out longer term policy priorities, which have been carried through to the Programme for Government for this new Senedd term.
32. As the Covid-19 pandemic moved into a second peak and lockdown, the work of the Recovery Sub Group became absorbed into the urgent areas of business support, social care and public health, and it was agreed by Partnership Council Members that Wales' recovery become a standing item at the full Partnership Council meetings, replacing the need for the sub group. The Recovery agenda item features different policy areas as Partnership Council supports the longer term recovery of Wales' public services so they can continue to support people and communities.

## Programme for Government commitments

33. The Partnership Council plays a key role in enabling or supporting shared leadership on a range of Programme for Government commitments.
34. This relationship was further enhanced when, in October 2021, a meeting was held between the whole Welsh Government Cabinet (First Minister and all Ministers) and the 22 local authority Leaders in Wales. The purpose of the meeting was to build on and strengthen Welsh Government's constructive working relationship with local government, and to position the new Programme for Government priorities as a shared endeavour.
35. In response to the invitation to this event, the WLGA Leader stated:
- "We very much welcome your offer for this inaugural meeting, which will not only provide a valuable opportunity to explore mutual priorities and areas of concern but further strengthens our partnership approach to governance in Wales.*
- We already engage in constructive dialogue with individual Ministers and leaders but this will be the first time, since the establishment of the National Assembly for Wales, that the full Welsh Cabinet will have held a meeting with all 22 local authority leaders. This is therefore a welcome development and a model of central-local relations not replicated elsewhere across the UK.*
- We are keen to engage constructively in shaping and helping deliver the Programme for Government; leaders can ensure local experience and priorities help shape the Cabinet's national priorities and we can identify how local solutions can help ensure community needs are met and collective outcomes are achieved."*
36. The core priorities for discussion at the event, as identified by the WLGA and endorsed by Ministers, were the key issues of Climate Change (both mitigation and adaptation); and Social Care and Health.
37. At the event, the First Minister reflected on the last eighteen months and the critical working relationship Welsh Government and local government had developed which had been so crucial in helping to manage the pandemic and serve the people of Wales.
38. The First Minister emphasised how the relationship was now fundamental in delivering on shared ambitions for public service delivery in Wales and on the Programme for Government commitments.
39. The challenge was now to focus the constructive partnership working on the task of shaping recovery and to develop bold, creative, innovative solutions jointly to help achieve a better Wales. He stressed that the 'Team Wales' approach helped get through Covid and it can now help tackle the challenges of tomorrow.

## A key Programme for Government commitment delivered through the Partnership Council: Climate Change and Decarbonisation

40. Jointly tackling the Climate Change crisis, through a range of measures including decarbonisation, is a top priority for governments and public services internationally.
41. In Wales, the Partnership Council plays a crucial role in the Welsh Government, local authorities and other public service leaders developing, and overseeing the implementation of, strategies and policies which move Wales closer to achieving net zero targets and a greener Wales.
42. In June 2020, in recognition of the strategic importance of addressing the climate change crisis, the Council agreed a set of important commitments and a '[team wales](#)' approach. This included agreement that this work would be a standing item on Partnership Council agendas, despite the pressures of the pandemic and EU transition. It also included that an officials-level Local Government Decarbonisation Strategy Panel (the Panel) be established, and that all local authorities would have decarbonisation action plans in place.
43. The Partnership Council provides political leadership for the work of the Strategy Panel and receives an update on progress at each Partnership Council meeting during the standing item on Decarbonisation and Climate Change. Work by the Panel facilitated development of a series of Local Government commitments grouped under the four themes of the [Welsh Public Sector Route Map to Net Zero by 2030](#): procurement; transport; buildings; and land use. Those commitments fed into [Net Zero Wales](#) published in October 2021, setting out the policies and actions across Wales to meet the net zero targets.
44. A recent review (September 2021), led by the WLGA and funded by the Welsh Government, entitled the [Review of Welsh Local Government Decarbonisation Action Plans](#), included an overview of authorities' plans to work towards the goal of net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2030.
45. The WLGA had commissioned this review part of local authority plans as the first stage of their Welsh Government funded *Transition and Recovery Support Programme* (TaRSP) (bringing together the recovery from Covid, EU transition and the green agenda into one strategic programme). The programme is providing intelligence to those working on decarbonisation planning and climate change more generally, and that now includes adaptation and resilience following agreement at the Partnership Council meeting in November 2021. It is also developing ways to identify and share emerging practice; to support Elected Members and officers working in this area; and to inform the work of the Decarbonisation Strategy Panel.
46. The review of local authority action plans highlighted that there are multiple drivers for decarbonisation in Welsh local government and their wider communities; including political commitments to address the climate emergency; long-established work to reduce organisational carbon emissions; a wide variety of community-based projects and activity to reduce emissions in local

communities; and multiple partnerships delivering decarbonisation through programmes and projects across the local authority boundaries.

47. Baseline emissions generated by local authorities have been collated, using the methodology in the *Welsh Public Sector Net Zero Carbon Reporting Guide* from Welsh Government (May 2021).
48. Partnership Council will continue to support the public sector work to delivering against the targets in the Welsh Government's [\*Working together to reach Net Zero: All Wales Plan 2021-25\*](#) (October 2021) and in the updated [\*Programme for Government 2021 to 2026\*](#) (December 2021) which reflects the Co-operation Agreement reached with Plaid Cymru and includes a number of updates to the climate and nature emergency targets.
49. As with COP 26 itself, commitments that have been made are only as good as the manner in which they are taken forward and honoured. It will be important to keep a clear focus on progress being made at local, national, UK and international levels, and Partnership Council is an important forum for these ongoing focused discussions.

#### **Other Programme for Government commitments discussed at Partnership Council during the period of this report included commitments around:**

- Creating increased apprenticeship opportunities, particularly in relation to social care and health.
- Regenerating town centres, including focus on the circular economy.
- Implementing and funding the commitments made in our Race Equality Action Plan (to become the Anti-racist Wales Action Plan).
- Continuing to build on the strong partnership working between the Welsh Government, local government, the WCVA and voluntary organisations.
- Building of new low carbon social homes for rent.
- Tackling homelessness.
- Developing a second homes policy.
- Creating a timber based industrial strategy for Wales.
- Decarbonising more homes through retrofit, delivering quality jobs, training and innovation using local supply chains.
- Ensuring that each region in Wales has effective and democratically accountable means of developing their future economies.
- Keeping regional partnership working under review with local partners.
- Making 20mph the default speed limit in residential areas.
- Seeking to reform council tax to ensure a fairer and more progressive system.
- Reforming local government elections to reduce the democratic deficit.
- Strengthening the autonomy and effectiveness of local government to make them more successful in delivering services.
- Reducing the administrative burden on local authorities.

## Partnership working on local government policy and legislation

50. The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 [the Act] was a significant piece of legislation, several years in development. The reforms introduced by the Act were shaped through on-going consultation and dialogue with local government and wider stakeholders, including through the Partnership Council as well as several white and green paper consultations.
51. Recommendations from the independently chaired Working Group on Local Government (2018-19) were considered by a time-limited sub group of Partnership Council (the Local Government Sub Group) which refined the regional working recommendations which the Welsh Government introduced as Corporate Joint Committees.
52. Local government colleagues worked in partnership with Welsh Government officials throughout the Bill development process, providing expertise and advice across a range of areas including electoral administration, governance, scrutiny and statutory regional working arrangements.
53. Partnership Council also considered related policy and legislative proposals on electoral reform, including encouraging greater registration, engagement and participation in elections, the statutory survey of candidates and 'diversity in democracy' initiatives to encourage more diverse people to consider standing for elections.
54. In other policy areas, the Partnership Council commissioned a Review of Strategic Partnerships, which reported in June 2020, to explore concerns about partnership bureaucracy and complexity. The report concluded that local and regional partnerships should be encouraged to review their own alignment and appropriateness of their arrangements, but that the Welsh Government should not establish any new partnerships without considering whether an existing partnership can deliver the outcome required and that no new functions should be given to existing partnerships without appropriate resources or considering what other requirements could be reviewed or removed.

## Child Burials and Cremation

55. In 2017, Wales was the first country in the UK to reach agreement to waive child burial and cremation fees. This was delivered in partnership between the Welsh Government and local government – both local authorities and community and town councils, and was an excellent example of coming together on a shared commitment to address an extremely important issue.
56. At its meeting on 1 March 2021, Partnership Council members, Welsh Government, the WLGA and One Voice Wales, reaffirmed their commitment to the Memorandum of Understanding, which was re-signed in advance and tabled at the meeting. This agreed approach to child burials and cremation included a Welsh Government commitment to a further three years funding from 1 April

2021, and also, in addition to the waiving of fees, an additional contribution towards the funeral and other associated costs.

## **Supporting implementation of public services legislation**

57. The sharing of good practice and plans for implementation of public sector duties and responsibilities are important in achieving the required levels of consistency and flexibility of approach. A key feature of the Partnership Council ways of working is the willingness of members to share their experiences and views to assist each other and ensure adherence to the duties.

58. Examples of such duties discussed at Partnership Council during this period included the:

- Socio-Economic Duty
- Public Sector Equality Duty
- Race Equality Action Plan

## **The Finance Sub Group of Partnership Council for Wales**

59. The Finance Sub Group (FSG) is the main forum for discussions and decisions relating to the Local Government Settlement, the broader financial framework including finance reform, and strategic issues such as making council tax fairer.

60. FSG also provided a forum for discussions on the hardship fund for local authorities which provided essential support during the Covid-19 pandemic.

61. FSG members provide updates to the main Partnership Council on these issues as relevant.

## **Next steps**

### **Reviewing the Local Government Partnership Scheme**

62. The Local Government Partnership Scheme was last reviewed in 2017 and will next be reviewed following the Local Government elections in May 2022, with a view to a revised scheme being considered and developed by Partnership Council members and published by the end of 2022. The Terms of Reference will also be reviewed by members to ensure they are still fit for purpose and representative of members' views.

## **Acknowledgements**

63. The Minister for Finance and Local Government would like to thank all members of the Partnership Council for Wales for their commitment to the work of the Council, and to developing shared solutions to joint challenges. The expertise and advice so readily shared, and the drive and commitment to serving communities, have made a genuine difference to services and to the lives of people in Wales.